



# Handling the 'Herc'

AT LITTLE ROCK, COMBAT AIRLIFT IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

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**“W**e have a problem here!” As a shrill warning tone blares in the background, 1st Lt. Justin Gripp barks nervously into his headset, fighting the C-130 Hercules’ controls. With the back of one hand he wipes the sweat from his eyes and peers intently at the dozens of blinking lights and monitors in the cockpit surrounding him. “We’re stalling,” he says. His copilot, in the seat to his right, rifles through the pages

of a flight manual and waits for directions. “I think it’s a wing stall,” he says. “We must’ve been climbing too steeply.” Lieutenant Gripp anxiously glances around the cockpit, a bit unsure of what to do. The ground looms ever closer as the C-130 rapidly descends. Then an electronic voice calmly announces what the lieutenant is all too aware of. “Too low, too low,” the computerized female voice states. Lieutenant Gripp increases power to the engines and attempts

Amid a sea of C-130 Hercules, a crew performs preflight checks on one of the transports shortly before the aircraft departs for a training mission.





Airman 1st Class Ivory Feaster III (left) goes over a landing procedures checklist with Marine Pfc. J. L. Tiffin. The loadmaster students were on their first flight.

to release back pressure to give the wings lift.

"I can't pull out of it," he says, in a slightly shrill voice. "We're going down."

The plane is now rocketing toward the ground at an electrifying speed, gravity turning it into nothing more than a large, metal javelin.

"Crap," Lieutenant Gripp mutters dejectedly as he watches the ground rushing up to embrace him. "Sure messed this one up."

But the plane never reaches the ground. Before it gets the chance, someone in the rear of the cockpit pushes a button and the simulation ends.

## "WE'RE GOING DOWN."

The flight was in the C-130J simulator, an artificial trainer that uses state-of-the-art technology to give student pilots a realistic taste of flight before they take to the sky in the latest version of the venerable Hercules, which has been an Air Force workhorse since the mid-1950s.

The simulator is one of dozens of courses and training facilities used to ready crews at the C-130 Center of Excellence at Little Rock Air Force Base, Ark. For C-130 pilots, copilots, navigators, flight engineers and loadmasters, this is where it all begins.

From flying to fixing to loading the transport plane, the center's focus is not just to teach students like Lieutenant Gripp how to fly the C-130 better. The goal is to train aircrews to operate the four-turboprop aircraft to do one of its main missions — combat airlift.

After all, Little Rock is C-130 country.

"Training America's combat airlifters is the heart and soul of what we do at Little Rock," said Col. Rudy Byrne, the center's commandant and commander of the 314th Operations Group, which the school falls under. "That mission is vital in fighting and winning the global war on terrorism."

The C-130 plays a major role in this mission. Each day the transport delivers people and equipment to bases throughout the Middle East and Afghanistan. This unique combat airlift mission has kept more than 7,400 convoys off the roads in Iraq alone, the colonel said.

"Right now, the C-130 is really the workhorse of the Air Force in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Brig. Gen. Rowayne Schatz Jr., 314th Airlift Wing commander. "Approximately 80 percent of all troops arrive or leave the area of responsibility via C-130. This just shows how vital the C-130 is to our efforts over there."

And it's not just "over there" that C-130s are leaving their mark. The C-130 is also on the front lines of events happening in the United States and other nations across the globe.

During the late October and November 2007 wildfires in Southern California, C-130s hauled people and equipment needed to help fight the fires. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's devastation in 2005, C-130s flew mission after mission, flying hurricane victims, supplies and relief workers to storm-ravaged areas throughout the Gulf Coast. And when a tsunami devastated much of Southeast Asia, C-130s were there, too, delivering much-needed food, water and medical teams.

"The C-130 is just such a versatile aircraft," the general said. "All



Capt. Nathan Glasscock gets ready to take his C-130J Hercules model simulator in for a landing at Little Rock.





Tech. Sgt. Brian Beaty (back) works with a static wire on a C-130 Hercules training flight as student Airman 1st Class Ivory Feaster III (left) goes over his checklist and fellow student Marine Pfc. J. L. Tiffin (right) reflects on his first flight from Little Rock. Sergeant Beaty is an instructor loadmaster.

it needs is a dirt strip to land on and it can get there. There's really no mission it can't handle, whether it be combat airlift, mission support or humanitarian."

But the C-130 could accomplish none of these missions without a steady wave of aircrews to fly and operate it. Training the crews is the job of the Little Rock's combat-tested instructors. It's up to these trainers to teach students how to operate the "Herc" right inside the school's walls so they'll be able to handle the plane outside of them.

"We refer to this school as the center of the universe for C-130 training," Colonel Byrne said. "This is where C-130 crews learn the foundation for their skills in the aircraft. Because of this, we want to ensure they get the right knowledge here that will enable them to be successful when they go out the center's doors."

Current Air Force worldwide operations make this teaching model even more important. Students now find themselves heading "to the desert" soon after graduating — sometimes in two weeks or less.

"Gone are the days when crews could go to a unit and spend time getting further training," Colonel Byrne



Instructor crew chief Tech. Sgt. Shawn Taillon safety wires the quick disconnect on the main landing gear on a C-130J Hercules model trainer. In emergencies, the quick disconnect allows the crew to drop the planes landing gear when the manual crank doesn't work.



Airman 1st Class Justin Magno manually cranks the ramp on a C-130 Hercules fuselage trainer. This training involves using one of the cargo planes, minus its wings.

said. "Now, these guys get to their unit and within a few days they could be in Iraq flying into some remote airfield."

It's a new time that requires a new syllabus and a new breed of instructor. All classroom, simulator and cockpit training is taught by battle-hardened, combat-proven, deployment veterans. It only makes sense, instructors say. Students need to know the training they receive will make them capable C-130 crew members.

"Credibility is important in an academic environment," navigator instructor Maj. Sergio Vega said. "If we, as instructors, can give a real-life example of something we're teaching, it shows the students that, one, we know what we're talking about, and two, it really does work. It also helps that we have a wide range of experience and backgrounds."

So, too, do the students. Some have never set foot on a plane, while others have years of experience flying or working on other aircraft. Some are young, barely out of high school; others are older, returning to the center for advanced training.

The school even serves as a model of total force integration. It teaches active, Reserve, Guard, joint and international students from more than 30 allied nations.

"It's a very unique experience," said Royal Netherlands Air Force Sgt. 1st Class Eric Vandenberg, a C-130 loadmaster going through training at the school. "But I think having such a mix of people and skills makes for a better learning environment."

Even the school's faculty is a total force mix. The wing's sister unit, the Arkansas Air National Guard's 198th Airlift Wing, trains the instructors who will teach at the center.

"We really do embody the total force perspective," General Schatz said.

But no matter their age, rank or duty status, students come to the center for one reason: To become part of the C-130 community

and take part in its rich and long heritage of combat airlift.

"I think the draw for me was the C-130's mission," student pilot Capt. Matt Ferris said. "We all want to contribute to the [efforts] in Iraq and Afghanistan, and this aircraft definitely does that."

Many of his fellow students echo Captain Ferris' sentiment. Most are drawn to the plane, not because it has a flashy Hollywood image, but because of its workhorse and "in the trenches" reputation. It's a blue-collar, reliable aircraft that does what it's supposed to do — day in and day out, year after year.

So, its crews say, who cares what it looks like.

"It's definitely not a Lexus, but it gets the job done," Captain Ferris said.

Aircrews call the plane by other names: "The Dirty 30" or "Herky" — each an audible testament to their unwavering admiration for the plane.

Nicknames and looks aside, no one can deny the C-130 has heart. Having been in service for more than 50 years in one model version or another, the aircraft has seen action in Vietnam, Kosovo, the first Gulf War and is now back in the thick of the action in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When called, the C-130 has answered, hauling beans, bullets and butts wherever needed.

And at Little Rock, one school is taking men and women from across the globe and putting them in the cockpits and cargo holds of trusty old C-130s and training them to be the best combat airlifters they can be.

This is no small mission, as those involved are quick to point out.

"It's a daunting task," General Schatz said. "And we need to ensure we do the best we can, because lives literally depend on what we do here at Little Rock." ■